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Some fruit crops ruined; wheat damage likely

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Tuesday, April 10, 2007

What the National Weather Service called a "historic outbreak of cold temperatures" has apparently wiped out the local peach and grape crops, and may have severely damaged the region's winter wheat crop, growers said.

Much of the local peach and grape crops apparently perished, and at least some strawberry crops were damaged, after night after night of freezing temperatures.



Photo by Mike Lawrence

"I measured 22.3 (degrees) at 3 a.m. Sunday," said George H. Warren, whose Warren Berry Farm is located off U.S. 60-East.

"That's just cold," he noted. "Four evenings (of freezing temperatures) back to back. A cold snap we could handle," but such a string of freezing temperatures in April can pose a rare but lethal threat to tender blossoms and fruit buds.

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Frost covers strawberry plants at the Warren
Berry Farm off U.S. 60 East Monday
morning.

"Many records have fallen, or were very close to being broken over the last 3 or 4 days ... this just following a week in which temperatures topped 80 degrees and seven weeks of above normal temperatures across the

state," the University of Kentucky Agricultural Weather Center Web site declared.

"It is hard to appreciate the historic nature of cold in April, though it is an event that only happens every 100 to 200 years over a multiple day period like we have experienced," it said.

Initial reports are that cruit crops at some orchards and patches have been lost.

"I have not found a live peach," David Alexander, who with his son, Tim, operates the Cardinal Farms orchard on U.S. 41-Alternate south of Henderson, said Monday afternoon. "I've looked at three different varieties, and haven't found any live peaches. It looks like a 100-percent loss."

"We dodged it Friday night," Alexander said. "But Saturday night took them out."

But, he said, "The biggest loss could be 400 acres of (winter) wheat. It will be eight to 10 days before we can tell the damage.

"Southern Kentucky may have a total wipeout" of its winter wheat, Alexander said. "Theirs was much farther along, ready (for grain) to head out."

Local wheat wasn't quite as developed, "so it may not be a total loss," he said.

Across the road at the new Ruby Moon Vineyard and Winery, the recent freeze "took everything" in its one acre of mature vines, co-owner Anita Frazer said.

"We had little-bitty grapes that had just started out. They were about the size of your pinkie. The new shoots, some were three or four inches long. They're just mush," she said.

"We didn't lose the vines, just the grapes, Frazer said.

That doesn't mean Ruby Moon won't be able to make wine this year. It's possible, Frazer said, that a second crop of grapes will come out this year.

Moreover, the winery will be able to buy fruit or juice from other growers around the region.

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But with the Cardinal Farms peaches lost, she's not sure Ruby Moon will try to import peaches from down South to make its popular peach wine. "We may not do peaches," Frazer said. "It's kind of a sentimental thing. It won't be the same as making it from David's."

Mixed reports came from the county's orchards and strawberry patches. Warren ran water sprayers night after night at his 2.5-acre strawberry patch on U.S. 60-East, trying to use a layer of ice to protect the blossoms, but failed.

"I ended up losing my crop," he said.

At least the initial crop. "I've been in the strawberry business for 30 years, and I just found this out," that plants that lose their blooms to a freeze might produce a second, albeit smaller, crop of berries. "I'll have to wait and see," he said.

But Warren said he hopes to salvage 70 percent of his 300 yards of asparagus, and his blackberries, which hadn't bloomed, may yet come out.

There was better news at some other patches out in the county.

"Mine looked fine," Karen Martin of Hillcrest Baskets and Greenhouse on Anthoston-Frog Island Road, said. "They were blooming before it got cold and they're still intact."

Her strawberries are planted on hills covered with plastic, "so the roots were protected," which may have helped.

She also lost a few annuals in her flower greenhouse. But her new raspberry and blackberry plants, which are still a couple of years away from yielding fruit, appear okay.

At High Hill Orchard at Kentucky 1078 South and Alves-Ferry Road, Peter and Polly Schofield protected part of their five acres of peach trees with fire from smudge pots and covered some of their strawberries with straw and cloth.

But even the unprotected plants seemed to have survived with only partial damage. "So far it looks good," Polly Schofield said. "We'll just have to wait and see."

At the Mattingly Berry Patch on Corydon-Green Lick Road just outside Corydon, "I'm pretty confident we saved the berries," or at least 80 percent of the crop, Jim Mattingly said.

The Mattinglys covered their two acres of strawberries with three to five inches of straw, which seemed to capture subsoil heat while insulating from the cold air, he said.

"We'll know in about 10 days," he said. "We feel pretty confident."

Temperatures might not have been as cold at Corydon. "Evansville was giving out (reports of) 18 to 20 degrees," Mattingly said. "My ground thermometer just got to 27."

He's not sure what to expect from his acre of blueberries, which he had hoped would yield 4,000 to 6,000 pounds this year.

But whatever the state of his strawberry crop, Mattingly said he isn't going to jack up his prices.

He's heard reports that some Illinois growers will charge \$3 to \$3.50 per pound. "Our price is going to be \$1.25 per pound if they (the customers) pick or \$2.50 if we pick," he said.

"I'm not going to scalp people," Mattingly said.



Photo by Mike Lawrence

Ice covers some of the strawberry plants at Warren's Berry Patch off U.S. 60 East after George H. Warren used water sprayers to try to protect the blossoms with a layer of ice. But after four nights of freezing temperatures, Warren says the crop appears to be lost.

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